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SUBJECT: MODEST VICTORIES TO ACHIEVE COVERAGE OF A/S BOUCHER VISIT

Reftel: Ashgabat 215

Summary

¶1. (U) Local and international media provided relatively accurate and full coverage of the Ashgabat portions of the visit of Assistant Secretary for South and Central Asia Richard Boucher. However, host

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government efforts to ban local and international coverage of his appearance at the Turkmenabat Pedagogical Institute were successful, despite post's efforts to work around these barriers. Nonetheless, a backup media event in Ashgabat permitted Boucher to highlight the heavy emphasis his visit placed on education -- and to help combat persistent media attention to peripheral issues and rumors, such as Mary airbase plans.

Pre-Inauguration Speculation

¶2. (U) Prior to Assistant Secretary Boucher's arrival in Turkmenistan, both international press -- Reuters, Itar Tass and others -- and Turkmenistan state media reported his impending attendance at the February 14 inauguration ceremony. Some outlets -- particularly Russian sources -- suggested that his participation, like that of representatives from other countries in Europe and the former Soviet Union, was an attempt to get a foot in the door on post-inaugural gas deals and similar ventures. One such piece ran in the Russian Press Digest -- Russica Izvestia -- on February 15.

¶3. (U) BBC World Service's World Update radio program conducted a phone interview with Boucher on February 14 which was rebroadcast almost in full and excerpts of which appeared on that website the same day. The interviewer had asked what role the United States was to play in a new "great game" in the region, to which Boucher replied "We're not here to play games. We have made it clear throughout this region that we're not here to contend with anybody or to push anybody out. We're here to maximize the independence of these nations."

¶4. (U) International outlets covered some of the bilateral meetings Boucher held after the inauguration, such as that with Tajikistan's President Emomali Rahmonov, and with Kazakhstan's President Nursultan Nazarbayev. Coverage was brief and emphasized efforts to expand regional cooperation. State media did not cover the bilateral meetings.

State Media Coverage Comically Unprofessional

¶5. (U) Immediately following his February 15 meeting with President

Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedov, state press took an interview with Boucher, with Embassy FSN translation into Turkmen. Post issued Turkmen state television a revised Turkmen translation and a Russian translation, for its eventual broadcast of the story. State television did not use post's revised Turkmen translation -- but rebroadcast the Russian translation in full up to the end, cutting off the ending statement "So today we talked about the future, how we can work together and how we can develop our relationship."

¶6. (U) The February 16 editions of the state dailies "Neytralniy Turkmenistan" (Russian, circ. 35,091) and "Turkmenistan" (Turkmen, circ. 28,091) both gave the Boucher-Berdimuhamedov meeting high-profile, above-the-fold coverage with photographs; by contrast, Berdimuhamedov's meeting with Russian Prime Minister Mikhail Fradkov appeared below the fold in the same editions. However, the text accompanying the photo used only those segments of Boucher's interview that praised Turkmenistan or gently suggested plans for educational reform. (Note: The same issue placed Berdimuhamedov's two educational decrees -- described reftel -- directly to the right of Boucher's photographs. End Note.) The regional newspapers for each welayat printed the same text on February 17 but placed the stories differently. Comically, Balkan, the Balkan Welayat weekly, printed a photograph of the European Union delegation meeting with Berdimuhamedov under the title "U.S. Secretary of States meets with President" while the photograph of Boucher and Charge d'Affaires Brush appeared on the inside of the paper's front page, under the heading that the Libyan delegation had met with the new president.

State Strictly Controls Turkmenabat Press Event

¶7. (U) Post pressed to ensure that both state and international press would be able to attend Boucher's visit February 16 to the Turkmenabat Pedagogical Institute, where Boucher delivered comments emphasizing the U.S. Government's high priority on educational

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development in Turkmenistan. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs refused permission to both local and international journalists to travel to Turkmenabat, and refused to give permission to state press to cover the event. Post distributed an embargoed copy of Boucher's remarks on February 15, on the request of stringers from Associated Press and Reuters, and followed up by distributing photos of the event to journalists at a late February 16 press conference at the Public Affairs Section in Ashgabat. Post has not seen any international or state coverage of the Turkmenabat Pedagogical Institute event.

International Take on Boucher Press Conference

¶8. (U) Reuters printed several articles before and after the February 14 inauguration and after the February 16 press conference, emphasizing international criticism of Turkmenistan for human rights abuses, and in this context noted that "Boucher said he was hopeful for change, defending a policy of engaging with Turkmenistan before it demonstrates progress on human rights." The Washington Post ran a Reuters article on February 16 that draws accurately from Boucher's statements at the press conference and which included Boucher's refutation of a suggestion, made by a Le Monde reporter, that the U.S. Government would support expansion of its current overflight rights -- to include establishment of a base in Mary. Le Monde and the Associated Press both ran pieces on the inauguration and Boucher's presence, drawing from Boucher's remarks at the press conference.

COMMENT

¶9. (U) State press successfully hampered post's efforts to achieve maximum press exposure of Boucher's visit. Journalists' questions at the press conference revealed a continuing desire by international press to cast the U.S. Government's interest in terms of oil and gas issues or another "great game" -- reinforcing the importance of the concluding press conference and earlier BBC

interview in which Boucher had an opportunity to refute such claims.

¶10. (U) Post has attempted to have the video of the Turkmenabat Pedagogical Institute event or at least Boucher's cleared comments, placed in state press but these attempts have been rejected. Nonetheless, state press' willingness to accept and rebroadcast post's re-translation of Boucher's remarks to state press indicate at least a modest desire to provide coverage of high profile USG visits. End Comment.

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